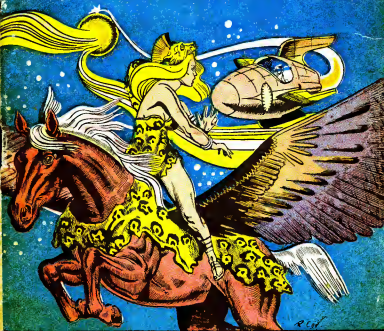


ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

AMAZONS OF THE ASTEROIDS



THRILLS INCORPORATED No. 17

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Of course they couldn't exist, these woman warriors of the multi-worlds; but they proved too deadly to be mere theories or mirages.

AMAZONS of the ASTEROIDS

By

N. K. HEMMING

THE "Starshell" had hit the fringes of the dust belt a couple of weeks out from Mars. The first few days ploughing through the Asteroid orbit had not been too bad, but they were deep in now and it was not only dust that crossed their path.

She was an experimental ship, the first to attain the 37 miles a second to escape Jupiter's gravity—where she was heading now. 2273 was the age of exploration. Venus and Mars had been visited, then the Earth explorers turned longing eyes at Jupiter's huge bulk.



The "Starshell's" crew were not large, the customary small scout sent out to make a preliminary survey. The larger forces would follow later. Floyd Estrom, her pilot and astrologer, Lee Jackson, engineer, and Doctor Gernitz supplied an all round knowledge of science for the project.

The fourth member of the party could not really be put into any category, but he had proved himself too useful to be left behind on any trip. He was economical too. He did not breathe or eat and existed solely on ultra-violet rays. He floated now in



the middle of the cabin, a little glass-like sphere filled with a thick swirling creamy substance, like heavy fog, and sometimes appeared lit by sparks, in fact Dirga the Venusian could give out quite a nasty little shock if he felt like it.

The video screen showed a large meteor headed for them and Floyd instinctively ducked. He knew the force-field around the "Starshell" would shunt it aside if it was small enough, if not the compact little electronic brain would make a split second determination of its course and turn the ship, but

Medusa raised her sceptre with a shrill cry, the Pegasus thundered across the ground, wings unfolded and the spacemen were borne away.

he still had that desire to duck a flying missile every time one of those erratic wanderers of space turned up.

"What a H—— of a locality," he commented disgustedly.

"It will get worse," Dirga replied with the calmness of his race.

Floyd heaved a book at him: "Shut up cheerful."

The little sphere dipped out of the way and changed colour to blue, denoting amusement.

"I don't see why we could not make a landing on some of the larger Asteroids," a plaintive voice put in. "We have plenty of fuel."

"Because Earth Government's more interested in Jupiter at the moment, Doc," Floyd explained patiently. He had had all this before. Gernitz had some whacky theory that the myths and legends of the ancient times about the Amazons, those warrior women of Earth's hoary past, were tied up with the planet that had exploded in prehistoric times to form what was now the Asteroids. His contention was that the inhabitants of that planet had known its balance was disturbed and had emigrated to Earth. It was an interesting theory, but nobody believed it, except Gernitz.

Floyd turned back to the screen, leaving Gernitz muttering in his short aggressive beard and it was at that moment that another meteor showed up, THE meteor. He had a strange feeling of unease the moment it appeared on the screen and his apprehension was not misplaced.

Suddenly the "Starshell" rocked and bucked crazily, flinging him forward to crash against the controls and Gernitz against the wall. Lee, asleep in his bunk, was tossed out, and even Dirga zipped across the cabin, changing to a startled green.

When things quietened down Floyd drew himself off the controls, hearing

Lee muttering in the background. "The electronic brain made a blue that time," he said grimly, "dipped us in the tail of the comet." He checked up on their course and found they were slightly off now, in fact heading straight for the largest Asteroid they had met with yet, and reached out a hand to the port vane control, to turn them. The lever refused to budge and swift alarm crossed his face.

Lee came to his side quickly. "It's jammed?"

"Yes—and we are heading straight for that Asteroid!" He tugged frantically at the lever, but it resisted his efforts. "We'll have to go down. I hope it's in one piece."

"We're going too fast," Gernitz warned.

"We will just have to chance that. Get to your acceleration bunks," he replied briefly.

THE other two strapped themselves in, but Dirga floated across the cabin and came to rest on Floyd's shoulder as he started savage deceleration, trying to bring the ship from interplanetary speeds to a merely suicidal dive in the short space of time they had.

In spite of the crushing pressure, a low startled cry managed to force its way through his set lips at the astounding change that was taking place in the Asteroid. It was not one, but three—and all three surrounded and linked by a blue haze of atmosphere. Easy on a hundred miles must have stretched between those three tiny planets, yet by some unknown and incredible law of the cosmos atmosphere occupied the gulf.

"It's not possible," he whispered. "Whoever heard of atmosphere between planets."

"There is atmosphere, therefore it is possible," Dirga stated in an analytical tone.

Floyd did not reply. The question of possible or not could be gone into later. At the moment he was more concerned with landing the ship without too much friction in that atmosphere. Two smaller planetoids revolved around a larger one and, using the starboard vanes, he managed to persuade the "Starshell" to come in for a landing on the largest. For a while it grew uncomfortably hot, then a jar announced they were down.

He leaned back with an exhausted grin, watching the other two stagger to their feet. "If I never have to come down that quick again, I'll be happy."

"You'll be happy," Lee groaned. "The only thing that would reconcile me at the moment is the sight of some of the Doc's Amazons."

"It is extremely unlikely any living creature could have survived the world catastrophe, but even so I don't think I should actually like to meet any Amazons," Gernitz said somewhat dubiously. "The old legends had them as a pretty ferocious crowd and men were regarded as less than dirt."

Floyd laughed and reached for a space suit. "Suppose we go outside and have a look."

The other two pulled on the lightweight plastic suits also and made their exit through one of the airlocks, Dirga floating by their side, unhampered by whatever atmosphere there might be.

It was slightly hazy outside, the sky a peculiar shade of bluish-green where it was not covered by clouds and Lee busied himself with a little gadget on his belt.

"Atmosphere poisonous," he announced, "mostly ammonia, methane and chlorine." He glanced down at the ground curiously to see what the terrain was like and suddenly stiffened. "Floyd, look at that!"

"That" was a footprint, the print of a horse's hoof—and had obviously only been recently made.

"So the place has got life," Gernitz said softly. "I wonder . . ."

What he wondered was never known. Something drew their eyes to the top of a low rise. The horse that stood there, a palomino with the slender legs and arched head of the thoroughbred and with something white laying along his sleek sides, was startling enough—but the girl who rode him nearly made their eyes pop out. She was slim and golden, blonde hair rippled to half-bare shoulders and clad in some garment that bore a slight resemblance to ancient Greek draperies, only the Greeks had worn rather more of the drapes.

"Wow!" Lee said expressively. "Moral—Psycho Control never designed that get-up."

AT this point the girl decided to take a hand. After surveying them with a puzzled frown from her point of vantage, she bent her head to the horse and it trotted down the hillside towards them. In her hand she held a slender lance fully six feet long with three cruel barbs on either side, and it was pointed rather suggestively at them.

"She does not look exactly friendly," Floyd commented, giving up wondering whether she really existed. After a system of planetoids with atmosphere between them, he was ready to believe anything.

The lady was definitely unfriendly. They saw her lips moving and switching on their helmet radios to pick up external sounds, heard a flow of unintelligible words. The beautiful face was arrogant in its assurance, and anger gleamed in the topaz eyes as she pointed off towards the nearer of the other two planetoids. She did not seem in the least afraid of, or in awe of, the strangers in her homeland. On the contrary, they rather got the impression that she regarded them as a definitely inferior species.

Dirga floated around her and she made a prod at him with the lance, then he returned to Floyd's shoulder, yellow with interest. He did not have vocal chords, but his means of communication was rather more effective since he could pick up brain waves and transmit them again, a kind of telepathy.

"I think the Doctor may be right in his theory," he announced. "This female of your species regards the male as inferior. She asked why you were not in the pens."

"It ties up," Gernitz said excitedly. "The Amazons treated their menfolk as almost slaves."

While this discussion was going on, noticing they took no notice of her spate of words, the girl became even more angry and prodded Gernitz with the point of her lance. Quite casually, Floyd reached out and removed the weapon from her hand and sheer surprise wiped the anger from her face. She stared at him blankly for a moment, then the anger was back and she slid from the saddle of spotted skins and stalked up to him, reached out for the lance.

He grinned and drew it back. "Naughty, mustn't snatch."

ANOTHER spate of unintelligible words came from her lips and the anger flared in her eyes again as she raised her hand savagely to strike him, but he caught her arm, incidentally finding it exceedingly difficult to hold her. That slim body must have housed the strength of a mountain lion and almost immediately she was free, springing into the saddle of her horse, but with the assurance and arrogance gone now from her face. For the first time they saw fear in her eyes, fear and bewilderment.

A shrill cry burst from her lips. The horse sidestepped skittishly, broke into a gallop—then unfolded the white streaks along its sides and left the

ground. The three Earthmen stood and gaped.

Floyd and Lee looked at each other blankly and gulped and even Dirga went green, but Gernitz was exuberant.

"Flying horses!" he yelled, "and did you hear what she called out—Medusa! Pegasus, the flying horse, is in Greek mythology as well—and Medusa was an Amazon queen."

Floyd drew a deep breath. He had got to the stage where anything was possible. "O.K., Doc," he said with a helpless shrug, "I give in, they did go to Earth—but how did they breathe there? Up here they seem perfectly at home in an atmosphere that's mostly chlorine. I never remember the legends having them walk round in space suits."

Not even that point stumped Gernitz. "What about that experiment of a couple of years ago? A rabbit breathing normal atmosphere had been operated on so that he lived for six weeks breathing pure nitron. Before this planet broke up they must have been fairly advanced, certainly they had space travel to reach Earth, couldn't they have also been advanced enough to have operated on some of their people to breathe oxygen?"

Lee struggled between amusement and incredulity, while Floyd remained thoughtfully silent, but Dirga was more open minded. "I think you are right," he announced.

"I think we ought to have hung on to that girl then," Lee put in. "We might have found out something about this whacky system."

"There's still time," Floyd answered, and made for the airlock of the "Star-shell." "I'll take out the baby scout and bring her back."

"O.K. Doc and I will go to work on the vane while you're gone," Lee agreed.

"I shall accompany you," Dirga announced, and Floyd grinned good-naturedly. He liked the queer little Venusian.

THE tiny scout was launched from the mother ship, and Floyd watched the "Starshell" fade from view, then glanced at Dirga as he floated before a radar screen.

"Picked up anything yet?"

"She is no great distance ahead of us," the Venusian replied.

They had been flying for a short while when a faint dot appeared on the screen, grew rapidly until they could see the horse and its beautiful rider plainly, the great wings of the animal beating the air strongly. As the distance lessened the girl looked round fearfully, and it was plain from her expression that it was an emotion she was not used to. She had been surprised when Floyd had annexed her lance. Probably a man had never stood up to her before.

Suddenly the radio broke into strident life. "Trouble," came Lee's voice, rather breathless. "These blondes play rough. We're . . ."

Abruptly his voice broke off and Floyd swore softly and wrenched on the controls. The scout turned almost in its own length and incredulous relief came to the girl's eyes as she saw the sky monster retreating.

He grimly strained his eyes for the first sight of the "Starshell," realising they had underestimated the Amazons. Perhaps it was some deepseated masculine conceit that refused to treat them as serious, in spite of all the legends there had been about them.

When the "Starshell" appeared all was quiet below and the other two men still did not answer signals. He brought the scout down by the side of the mother ship and stepped out. Dirga was on his shoulder, a fully charged electron ray in his hand.

He began to walk towards the larger ship and suddenly a form darted down out of the clouds. A hoof knocked Floyd flying and Dirga changed to a startled green and skidded through the

air. When Floyd picked himself up flying horses were landing all around, slim blonde figures rose in the saddle and lances flew with unerring aim, to bounce off the tough plastic of his space suit.

He grinned. There did not seem to be much damage they could do. But he was wrong. Those blonde bombshells were reaching now for little mauve spheres that hung from the gold cords of their drapes. They too were tossed through the air—with more dire results. As the mauve shells burst a thick, sticky liquid oozed out on to his space suit and tiny bubbles immediately began to blister the surface.

Dirga turned a peculiar shade of intense red that Floyd did not remember ever having seen before and darted around knocking the little mauve grenades of corrosive acid from the Amazons' hands, loosing a sharp electric charge as he did so, a fact attested to by sharp cries of pain.

Floyd took stock of his suit. The acid had not worked through yet, but there was no telling how long the plastic would hold out. He raised his gun at last, overcoming his reluctance to fire on women, and one of the Amazons cried out sharply as the blistering ray touched her arm and angry red weals appeared on the golden skin.

He threw a quick look over at Dirga. He was still darting about, but Floyd knew that those electric charges were somehow tied up with his ultra-violet ray metabolism and loss of them would weaken him.

In earnest now he fought his way to the ship, his scruples giving way before the desire for life, but his eyes were stinging and watering and he coughed, gasping for breath. It did not seem to be oxygen he was breathing, and he knew the suit must be pierced.

Gun in hand, with the other he reached for the repair solution in his poc-

ket and daubed it on the spot where one of the mauve acid balls had struck. Luckily the corrosive agent evaporated quickly and he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the repair solution rapidly drying. Still, there must be plenty of chlorine in the suit. It would take the filters some time to clear it.

From behind, a white horse darted down, a gorgeously proportioned blonde on its back, but the expression of her green eyes certainly was not dreamlike, and her horse's hoof kicked Floyd savagely to the ground, where he lay unmoving.

There was a cry from the other women as her horse touched ground, and, although almost unconscious, he managed to work up slight interest at the sound of the name they called—Medusa—and he saw she held in one hand some grisly kind of a sceptre, a silver wand from which three silver skulls dangled.

The white horse reared, neighing fiendishly, but she sat the gorgeously caparisoned saddle of spotted skins confidently and, leaning over the side, scooped him up with her free arm, the whole action performed with an ease and strength that was not good for his masculine ego. In fact, so bad was it, helped by the chlorine fumes, that he passed out altogether.

Medusa raised the sceptre with a shrill cry, echoed by the other women, and the horses thundered across the ground. Great wings unfolded and beat the air. Medusa and her warrior women were departing, but they were not alone. Behind, never losing sight of them, drifted a little Venusian sphere.

FLOYD slowly recovered consciousness and looked round. Bending over him were Gernitz and Lee, both of them looking extremely anxious.

"Whew, you had us worried," Lee said relievedly. "You must have got an awful heavy dose of chlorine."

Floyd grinned ruefully, wishing he could remove the helmet to rub his smarting eyes. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"They descended on us in force while we were outside looking at the vane," Lee replied. "Before we knew what had happened we were neatly trussed up. How did they get you?" he added.

Floyd told him and looked round the room they were in. It was high and vaulted and all around were groups of puny men.

"I take it we have been thrown in with the weaker sex," he commented grimly. "What a lot of boobs they look."

Gernitz shook his head sadly. "They are absolutely riddled with superstition and apparently regard the Amazons as almost superhuman."

"Found out anything about where we are?" Floyd asked curiously.

"Not much, although we managed to converse a bit by sign language. This is evidently part of an incredibly old city. The whole race has obviously degenerated terribly from the original one. There are buildings here filled with giant machines, but the people have forgotten what they were used for and regard them as taboo. The whole city is enclosed in a bubble of some shockproof material. They speak of it existing before the planet broke up."

"But that must be close on a million years ago, probably more," Floyd put in incredulously.

"I know. I have been examining the walls. They are neither metal nor stone, but some totally unknown composition. From what I can gather, the ancients, the dominant sex being the women even then, built three bubble cities as refuges when they knew the planet was going off its rocker, but the shock of the explosion must have caused some sort of amnesia in the mind of the people. I should say some of those old machines hold the three

planetoids with the bubble cities together and even retain the atmosphere by some magnetic attraction. There are rumours, too, of operations performed on some of the people so that they might go to live in a place they called Avrantis."

"Avrantis!" Floyd said sharply, and Gernitz nodded.

"Yes, I had also noticed the similarity to the lost continent of Atlantis. There may be some connection. It would account for no traces of a civilisation that far advanced being discovered on Earth. We could not find it if the continent had sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. If we could study the old records here we would doubtless find an answer."

"We're not in a position to study anything cooped up here with not a gun between us," Floyd said grimly.

"What happened to Dirga?" Lee put in, suddenly recalling that the little rainbow-hued Venusian was not with them.

"I don't know," Floyd replied worriedly. "The last I saw of him he was still flying around, but I wish he would not use those electrical charges of his for fighting. Nobody's ever found out how the Venusian's metabolism works, but you know losing those charges weakens him."

AT that moment a stir ran through the other men in the room and, looking around, the Earthmen saw two Amazon guards had come in and were making for them. Ungently their arms were grasped and they were led out, through passages whose ceilings and walls were all made of that unknown time-resisting material, stopping at last before great bronze-like doors where two other women stood guard.

There was a short interchange of words and then the doors were thrown open and they walked between their captors into a great hall lined with

white-clad Amazons. At the far end a kind of raised dais was occupied solely by a straightbacked chair hung with the familiar spotted skins. In the chair, clad now in a glittering gold robe, and holding her grisly sceptre of office was Medusa.

"That's evidently Medusa," Gernitz whispered. "The men described her sceptre. Evidently it was a custom to call their queens Medusa, and the name cropped up on Earth also."

"You're telling me she's Medusa," Floyd muttered. "That's the hattle-happy beauty who draped me over her arm like a featherweight."

Medusa at this moment decided they had advanced far enough and held up her hand arrogantly. Immediately the two Amazon guards brought them to a stop and stood on either side, lances crossed in front of the men.

With the radios of their helmet on they could hear her speaking to them, but without Dirga's telepathy were unable to understand. Next she tried by sign language to question them, but that again was no use and, taking it as a sign of stubbornness and opposition to her will, she rose to her feet, her green eyes flashing with anger.

A short whip lay nearby and she picked it up, lashing out at Floyd viciously. Immediately Lee leapt forward and wrenched it from her and murder flared in her eyes.

Striking him away from her sharply, she hit out a few words and half a dozen Amazons stepped forward, bows and arrows in their hands. On the end of those arrows was no sharp barb—but a little mauve globe.

THE distant sun glistened on the blue exterior material of the bubble city and by a gaping doorway that might once in the past have possessed insulated doors, hovered a little sphere.

In the opening stood an Amazon, her back to him, and he darted down

quickly to touch the back of her neck. She dropped without a sound, but a queer grey tinge faintly entered the normal creamy-white of the Venusian.

Dirga floated across the Amazon city unmolested. If anyone saw him they were not sufficiently interested or uneasy to wonder what the strange object was, but he was interested in them and telepathically picked their minds as he passed over. Very soon he knew where the Earthmen were confined and the location of a certain other building.

It was the latter to which he went first, a building in the same broken, ancient state as the rest, and floated in through the window. The dust of ages lay over the machines and weapons there, but at last he found what he wanted—a weapon that the ancients had operated by mental control.

It was a squat, ugly little thing and, with the queer extrasensory perceptions of his race, his mind reached inside the weapon to discover its use.

He hovered over it and gradually it began to move, broke from the clips that had held it for untold ages and, as he moved slowly away, it moved with him. Now the grey tinge had increased, grown slightly darker.

Out of the building he went, still moving infinitely slow, as if it drained his very life source, the weapon following him, until he reached at last the great central building, not so dilapidated as the rest, where Medusa held court.

Reaching out telepathically, he found the minds of the Earthmen and saw through their eyes the arrows with the deadly acid directed at them. He moved a little quicker then, but the grey tinge was darkening even more.

The spurt he had put on momentarily seemed to have weakened him and now he went more slowly than ever, but at last the doorway was in sight and he could see the forms of the Earth-

men facing the deadly arrows, resigned but unafraid.

He turned and the weapon turned with him, until it was pointed at the row of archers. Nothing touched it, but the firing button gradually pressed down and the grey of the Venusian sphere deepened almost to black.

For a few brief seconds a stabbing ray of blue leaped out and enveloped the archers, then both the gun and the little sphere fell to the ground, but it was time enough for the Earthmen. As the archers froze to immobility, they leaped for the doorway and Floyd snatched up the weapon, sweeping it round the room.

They were about to run down the corridor when he realised that the Venusian had not risen from the floor and turned in quick apprehension.

"Dirga!"

"Leave me," came the weak thought wave, but grimly he bent and scooped up the little sphere.

OUT in the streets Amazons sought to stop them, but the paralyzing ray froze them before they could get near enough to use the deadly acid shells and, seeing a group of flying horses standing idly in an open place, they confiscated them.

The half wild animals bucked, but soon found that men could control them as well as Amazons and took to the air quite placidly outside the city. There Lee and Gernitz, who had both been conscious when brought to the city, looked round to get their bearings and kicked their heels into the horses' sides in the time honoured Earth way. It did the trick all right, and, with amazing quickness, their relieved eyes picked out the ship below.

The moment they landed Floyd issued orders. "Lee, get on with the repair immediately, and Doc stand by with the gun. If anyone shows up use it. If need be use the electron rays on full

strength also. I'm going to put Dirga under the ultra-violet beams immediately. It might save him."

The other two nodded and Lee picked up the deserted tool kit he had dropped when the Amazons first attacked, Gernitz standing grimly alert with the gun, but evidently the Amazons had had enough and, as Lee laboured to get the jammed vane working uninterrupted, Floyd placed the Venusian, now jet black, under brilliant ultra-violet light.

It was a couple of hours later that Lee and Gernitz returned, the former weary but triumphant, and he found Floyd sitting with his head bent in his hands before a little black globe that lay unmoving beneath powerful ultra-violet beams.

"Dirga?" he questioned anxiously.

Floyd lifted a haggard face. "Gone," he said expressionlessly. "He used up his life force in mental levitation." He rose abruptly to his feet and snapped off the rays. "What about the vane?"

"It's working," Lee replied and his voice was husky.

"Well, I guess your theory was O.K. on those Amazons, Gernitz. You'll have quite a story to tell them back at the Planetarium Congress . . ."

"I don't think I'll be telling much," sighed Gernitz. "All that decadence—what good would it do? Let's get off this damn planet. I hope I never see it again in my life," he burst out as violently as only a man whose dreams had turned to ashes could.

Liquid oxygen and alcohol fell down vast pipelines into the atomic furnace, wave upon wave of sound piled up in the familiar torturing roar of rockets, until the very ground trembled and vibrated, then the "Starsbell" was gone, rising from the hazy blue atmosphere into the cold darkness of space, a darkness as cold and black as a little Venusian sphere . . .

THE END

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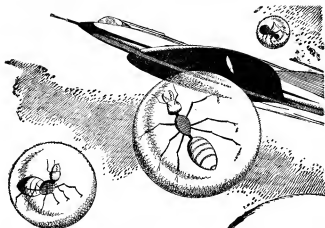
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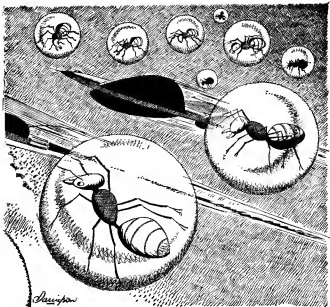
INSECTANT INVASION

A science fantasy by G. C. BLEECK

*They rained from the sky—
harmless at first, but each
a minature voracious death
in the making . . .*

"YOU anticipated me by one day, Inspector." Professor Decker smilingly welcomed the young man. "My intention was to present the Central Science Council with a paper tomorrow, giving details of the work I am engaged upon, and the results of my recent experiments."

"Orders are orders, Professor," said Greg Harmon, of the Scientific Inspection Corps. "I'll have to inspect right now. That's the policy of Central Science you know—inspection without warning. You are quite above suspicion, of course. No question of your



using the funds and resources supplied by Central Science for your own profit, or in any way to the detriment of the community, but individuals don't mean a thing to Central Science. We're a cold-blooded, impersonal crowd." He added, by way of further explanation, "Central Science is still jittery after that Gamma Centauri affair."

"An affair that cost thousands of lives, Earthmen's lives as well as the Centaurians', all in a few days of swift warfare!"

The Professor sighed as he led the way into the huge domed laboratory,

illuminated brightly by its tiny artificial sun set in the topmost point of the dome.

"Centauri's third planet won't start another interplanetary war," said Greg confidently, following the Professor inside. "Their spaceships can't get to Earth through our ray-barrier, thanks to Central Science. The worst the Centaurians could do would be to perform isolated acts of piracy on our own spaceships—until we send out a punitive expedition and give them another lesson. Still, Central Science takes no risks, and the Council is at present

obsessed with the idea that the Gamma crowd may have corrupted one of you savants, with the object of finding some method of combating the ray-barrier. Hence the sudden intensification of our routine inspections, Professor."

"Most unflattering to us as a body," murmured Professor Decker. They moved down the huge room to one of the innumerable automatic sliding doors, which opened as they approached, and through which emerged a tall heavily-built man, bald and pale of face, and wearing the white uniform of a Scientist. "You have not met my Assistant," said the Professor. "Dr. Marrark—Inspector Harmon, of Central Science."

"How do you do, Inspector. No, this is our first meeting."

"You were in another District," said Greg.

Now, your own work over the past month, Professor?"

"In here—and it is the culmination of many months of study and experiment, Inspector." The Professor led the way into the room from which Dr. Marrark had just emerged, followed by the young Inspector. The latter stopped abruptly on the threshold, a little gasp of shocked astonishment issuing from his lips. He stared at the creature in the fine-meshed cage standing on a table.

"Great heavens! What—what is it? It looks like—— But it can't be!"

"Nevertheless it is," said Professor Decker, "an insect. Or, as I have renamed it, an insectant. Actually, it is merely a black ant."

"An ant!" breathed Greg. The thing was fully two feet long and almost a foot high. Its colossal mandibles looked like small scythe blades. Its enormous multiple-faceted eyes, fixed on the men, sent a shudder of horror through the young Inspector. Along its blue-black length the shell-like skin glistened like armour.

AS the watchers eyed the thing in silence it turned its head on its comparatively tiny neck and clicked its mandibles sharply, furiously, all movements lightning swift in spite of its unnatural bulk.

"What a horror!" exclaimed Greg.

"Nothing in Nature is, properly considered, horrible, Inspector," corrected Professor Decker.

"So this is the work you have been engaged upon, Professor; a growth stimulating agent?"

"Exactly. And as you see, most successful work."

"It's certainly interesting from an academic viewpoint, but what practical benefits have you in mind?"

"The enormous strength of an insect has always intrigued me, as a biologist," said the Professor. "The tiny ant can travel at speeds which would be unbelievable in any of the larger creatures, and carrying as much as twenty times its own weight without apparent effort; and it can drag an infinitely greater weight than that. Consider the capacity of any of the insects, the speed and strength of a spider; the fearsome weapon with which the mosquito stabs its victim; the jumping powers of a grasshopper. Imagine yourself being reduced to the size of an ant and consider your utter helplessness when confronted by these insects!"

An involuntary shudder passed through Greg at this glimpse into a tiny but horrifying world. The Professor went on, "The insect world outnumbers the animal world by approximately four to one. They have been the most successful of Nature's creations in the struggle for existence. They have more than held their own in the thickest of the fight, and they have steadily advanced in numbers through the ages. Obviously they have an innate adaptability, and, in spite of their indifference to individual destruction, strong individual resourcefulness. In

short, Inspector, they are creatures that could well be studied, with a view to finding out their biological secrets, just as we have probed into the inner matter of the atom. We may be able to improve the general physical strength and metabolism of Mankind by a study of these creatures, now that I have the means of bringing them up to a size approximating to our own."

"I see. Man's physical resources may be artificially improved?" Greg looked at Dr. Marrark, who in turn was eyeing the monstrous insectant with a peculiar intensity. "But if ever such horrors got loose, got out of hand . . ."

"That is scarcely likely, Inspector." Dr. Marrark filled the silence with his soft, almost inaudible voice. "The process is a secret one, and it will shortly become the property of Central Science, who will guard it zealously."

"You know the complete process, Doctor?" Greg tried to conceal his disappointment when the Doctor replied, "Naturally."

BY way of reply the Professor motioned to Dr. Marrark, and the latter moved to the long white bench on one side of the room, and stood before a tiny jet which projected from a cylinder. He turned a switch, and from the jet there issued a bubble which increased in size and finally broke away from the jet when it had reached a diameter of two inches. The bubble dropped lightly, bounced on the bench, and another bubble appeared at the nozzle of the jet.

"That," explained the Professor, picking up the first bubble and handing it to the Inspector, "is the container for the tiny ant. The bubble is filled with the drug, which is a colourless gas. Dr. Marrark will demonstrate the whole process."

The Doctor opened a small drawer, and Greg saw that it was a mass of tiny black ants, busily feeding on a syrupy substance. He watched while

Dr. Marrark inserted a small suction syringe, drew a single ant into its transparent stem, inserted the tip of the syringe into the bubble and expelled the ant into the bubble's interior. He withdrew the syringe and the minute hole in the bubble immediately closed and sealed.

"The ant," said Professor Decker, "will absorb the gas within two hours, by which time it will have reached the maximum size possible whilst it is confined in the bubble; roughly a length of two inches. As long as it remains inside the bubble it will remain at that size. But immediately the bubble is dissolved the freed ant will grow, within four hours, to the size of that fellow in the cage."

"And how is the bubble dissolved?" "Infra-red rays will dissolve it indoors; but ordinary daylight will dissolve it."

"So if I were to toss this little bubble outside," said Greg within say four—or rather—six hours—it would produce one of those monsters in the cage there?"

"Exactly," assented Professor Decker. He moved over to a door which he unlocked, opened it, and revealed shelves, hollowed out to form receptacles for the plastic bubbles. There were several hundreds of the bubbles, each one containing an ant two inches in length, some black, some red.

GREG looked along the rows of shelves. If, by some oversight those things burst through their bubbles and got free, and developed like the monster in the cage, they would cause incalculable damage. They could scarcely escape from the metal structure of the laboratories, but they would certainly wreck this portion of the place and ruin costly and rare equipment and material.

He closed the door, and snapped open his official wallet strapped to his belt.

"You're not going to—" began Professor Decker, as Greg drew out a metal sealing device.

"I'm sorry, Professor," said the Inspector, "but I am afraid I shall have to seal not only that cupboard, but this room as well. I shall report to Central Science at once, and you will be asked to attend the Council first thing tomorrow. The seal will be removed, and you will be permitted to carry on with your work if, and when, the Council is assured that all possible precautions have been taken. You know the formalities . . ."

"Very well, Inspector," sighed Professor Decker. "I suppose you have no other course."

Greg made no reply. He affixed the heavy seal to the door of the cupboard containing the insectants, then sealed the laboratory door. He issued the usual routine warning. "In the event of the seal being tampered with or broken, the Scientists of the laboratory concerned shall be deemed to be responsible, and under Section 1b shall be liable to expulsion for life from all Research, and in addition such penalties as the Security Committee may determine, after hearing the defence of the said Scientists." As he intoned the warning in a level emotionless official

tone, he looked fixedly at Dr. Markark. The Doctor nodded slowly, but made no comment.

THE laboratory was still, quiet, darkened. Above, where the sleeping quarters were situated, there was light. A thin vertical strip of light as a door opened a fraction. The strip became a rectangle as the door was slid fully open. A dark-gowned figure moved silently from the room and paused at another door, slid it open and, still moving like a shadow, entered the bedroom. It emerged again and passed down the wide staircase into the outer laboratory. That, too, was in darkness, but the man moved unerringly around the tables and equipment until he reached the door that had been sealed. He ran his hand along the snugly fitting door, until his fingers encountered the seal—and it was broken!

Very cautiously the man's fingers closed over the handle and, with infinite care, he slid the door open, slowly and silently. Bright light filled his eyes; and he found himself staring into a face, which suddenly became distorted with fury. The furious face was the last thing he ever saw. Something crashed on to his skull. He dropped, a limp heap on the white floor . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Broken Seal

INSPECTOR GREG HARMON arrived early at Professor Decker's laboratory on the following morning, in accordance with regulations, to inspect the seal. Later, when the Council had studied his report, there would be a further official visit to the laboratory. A white-uniformed elderly servant opened the door and admitted him, and the vague uneasiness that had

troubled the young Inspector overnight flared up at the worried expression in the servant's eyes. "Anything wrong?" he asked sharply.

Greg brushed past the man and entered the main laboratory. He went to the door at the far end, drew a quick breath when he saw the ragged ends of the broken seal. He was about to open door when he recalled

the thing that was inside. He took out his miniature atoflame pistol, and holding it in his right hand, slowly opened the door with his left. He stood, transfixed, at the sight that met his gaze. The small laboratory was a scene of utter disorder, benches were overturned, bottles and jars cluttered the floor, their contents a mixed muddy pool against the white floor covering—and in the centre of the floor lay a heap of bones.

The great blue-black creature's multiple expressionless eyes were fixed upon him. He raised the atoflame gun, and the giant ant, instinctively, it seemed, sensing danger, moved towards him, its six legs carrying the gross body forward with incredible speed. Greg closed the switch of the atoflame, and a thin spear of light sped from the weapon to burst in a searing flame on the great black head, vaporising it. It should have been the end of the monster, and Greg lowered the gun as the vapour cleared.

THE power in those long black legs was incredible as they unwrapped him like steel cables. A biting acid which the thing exuded filled his eyes, causing tears to start and roll down his cheeks. Through a blur he saw the horrible shining body pressing on to his own. He raised the gun. The range was so close that an atoburn to his own body was inevitable if he used the gun, but the alternative, a twisted crushing death under the madly-clawing legs and the drenching discharge of formic acid was even more terrible. He shouted wildly to the old servant whom he had left outside. He heard footsteps hurrying towards him, and then suddenly, with a convulsive writhing, the great cable-like legs stretched out to their full incredible length and the headless insect-ant lay still, sprawled on top of him twitching futilely in death.

"An alkali!" he gasped as the old servant appeared and stood, horror-stricken in the doorway. "Quick! My eyes. Look along the shelves. The stuff's grouped—an alkali." He rose and groped to the shelves, thankful for the standardised layout of the Science Council's laboratories; and with the assistance of the servant he found a mild antidote and bathed the reeking burning acid from his face and hands. He ran to the visiphone and put a call through to Central Science on the secret wavelength.

Thurston, one of the Security Inspectors, was known slightly to Greg. He rapped out questions, storing the other's answers in his mind, and issued commands to the junior officer that accompanied him. Thurston, big and florid, with years of experience and many notable triumphs behind him, ranked high in the Security Committee; but as Greg listened to him talking to the Central Office of Security Committee over the visiphone he shook his head vigorously at what he imagined the mistake the Security Inspector was making.

"Hold on, Thurston," he said urgently. "That's not the correct description of Dr. Marrark. You're—"

WHEN he closed down on the visiphone, Thurston turned to him. "Now, what is it, Greg?"

"You've given an entirely wrong description, Thurston."

"The man we are after," said Thurston, with a grim smile, "is Professor Decker!"

"That," said Thurston, pointing to the smaller room, "is Marrark—or what is left of him. Now that he is gone you are permitted to know that he is one of us. One of our most trusted secret agents. A scientist in his own right, but actually a brilliant spy as well. His job was to pose as a frustrated man, an assistant who is dogged by bad luck; a dissatisfied man who is always seeking a change of masters.

"Dr. Marrark had already reported to you then?"

"To Central Science," corrected Thurston. "But we were not alarmed. Decker gave out to Marrark that he would report as soon as he had prepared a paper. Actually, it seems that he was hanging on in order to manufacture a large number of the insectant bubbles, for some purpose of his own. That is what I am assuming now, Greg."

"You had suspicions of Decker before this?"

"Nothing definite—just a few vague inconsistencies. We sent Marrark here as his assistant merely as a routine precaution." Thurston frowned in silence for some minutes.

Thurston's jaw tightened. "The devastation they would cause wherever they were set free would result in chaos in that area. Out of chaos comes opportunity to attack."

"You mean, the Gamma Centaurians?"

"Who else? Security is already warning every Ray-barrier Tower to be alert for any emergency. I am assuming that Decker, if indeed he is in league with Gamma Centauri, would concentrate his monsters in the vicinity of one of the towers with the object of putting the tower staff out of action, and thus leave a gap in the ray barrier for the Gamma spacecraft to pour through."

Another interplanetary war!" breathed Greg Harmon.

CHAPTER THREE

"Bubbles"

CRAIGEND Ray Tower differed in no way from the thousands of dull metallic towers that were spread over the whole of the Earth's surface, except in its comparative remoteness. The town of Craigend, with the advent of the army of technicians and scientists and general workers to build the Tower and the independent atomic powerhouse, and, later, to maintain the work, had grown to the proportions of a city in a few months. New buildings to house the technical staff and the administration sprung up almost overnight—plastic buildings moulded on the spot and ready for occupation within three days of commencement.

From the tower itself there jutted at regular intervals small lethal-looking muzzles, the atocannon which would automatically discharge their deadly missiles at any aircraft which came within ten miles of the town; for the Ray-tower towns were prohibited areas

in which all forms of aircraft, even the tiny aircars, were taboo. Outside the ten-mile limit were the aircar parking areas and the hangars for the intercity transport craft; within this ten-mile limit terracars were the only means of transport.

Outside the ten-mile zone, however, the air was busy with craft of all kinds, from the huge tourist characraft to the zipping little solo aircars, all rushing through the air in apparent aimlessness, but all intent on their respective destinations. Particularly aimless would have seemed to a close observer the movements of two superspeed sports craft, long ultra-streamlined costly machines, which circled the ten-mile limit several times, before flying off across the wide Craigend Bay, late one afternoon two weeks after the killing of Dr. Marrark, and the subsequent alerting of the Ray-towers.

The two craft came in from the sea

several hours later when the moonless night had closed over Craigend, leaving the city proper a glowing cluster in the velvet blackness of the surrounding countryside. The craft flew around the ten-mile limit once more, dropping lower and lower, their engines cut back to an almost inaudible throb. Other craft passed and re-passed the sports craft, but there was nothing about the low-flying machines to excite the attention or interest of other air passengers. But when the sports craft were almost skimming the dark ground of the parklands surrounding the city, a sudden rain of tiny bubbles issued from each craft. The bubbles floated gently to the ground, wafted hither and thither by the faint night breeze, but in the darkness they remained invisible from craft flying over the area.

More and more of the tiny bubbles issued from the speeding low-flying craft until countless thousands of the things were drifting to the ground, where they fell among the grass and trees and shrubs. The two craft rose higher in the air and shot off across the Bay, to return again and spawn yet another vast mass of bubbles . . . Craigend City went about its night pleasures. The teletheatres disgorged their crowds, who went on to the all-night clubs and cabarets; others slept soundly in their beds; all were unaware of the terrible black army that was being hatched in millions around their young city, an army more fierce, more dangerous, than any of Mankind's most devastating weapons. An army whose individuals could feel no pain, and who acted as one great intelligent unit in its fierce desire for food, and its warlike passion to subdue and tear to shreds any opposition to its primitive needs . . .

IN the great Ray-tower itself the night shift technicians went over the huge ray-generating equipment, checking the dials, cutting in the auxiliary plant and

observing its perfect takeover from the normal plant.

"All in order," reported the two Technicians to the Ray-tower Commander. "By the way, Chief, have you heard of any further developments following that scare-warning of two weeks ago?"

"Not a thing! Died a natural death. I'm not surprised either. You know what a crowd of scaremongers Central Science are." The Chief grunted. He rose and went to his office above, muttering about the jittery crowd in Central Science and the additional work involved in the special reports he had to send in since the emergency warnings. The two Technicians remained below, working on the maintenance of the equipment through the night. When they next saw their Chief, shortly after sunrise, they were shocked by his demeanour. The older man's face was deathly white. He could scarcely talk under the stress of his emotions.

"What on earth has happened, Chief?"

"A—a call on the visiphone from the town," gasped the man. "The town is overrun with—with ants!"

"Ants. Why, that's utterly——"

"Ants like dogs," blurted out the Chief. "The viewers—switch them on!"

With the viewing screens on the Chief focussed the range with hands that trembled. The probing beam from the viewers was focussed on the land outside the ten-mile security limit—land that only the day before had been covered with rolling stretches of green grass, clumps of ornamental scrub, and avenues of trees. Now it was devastated land! Everything had been torn down as by a mammoth all-embracing sickle. And over the area was a huge moving black carpet, glinting blue-black in the slanting rays of the early morning sunshine.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Professor Returns

GREG HARMON, warned over the visiphone, was in front of the mammoth hock of flats in which he lived at Metropolitan City, waiting impatiently for the arrival of Thurston. The official aircar swept down at last, and Greg hurried across to the runway section of the wide street and took his seat beside Thurston. The Security Inspector snapped in the controls and the aircar lifted and soared into the air, and it was speeding at maximum velocity before he spoke.

"We're taking a two-thousand-mile run, Greg," he said. "To Craigend."

"Professor Decker! You've located him?"

"I haven't snapped Thurston. In the meantime we've got to save the Craigend Tower and if possible get on to Decker and his men."

"Save Craigend Tower!"

"Craigend is overrun with those giant ants," said Thurston savagely. "It happened during the night. The staff of the Ray-tower are virtually besieged. Craigend is marooned in a vast sea of ants. Residents are holding out in buildings, using atoflame guns on the invading insectants, but the creatures are hurrowing under buildings. There are millions of the things. Decker and whoever are working with him must have been working around the clock over the past two weeks turning out those bubbles. They were dropped all around the city and after the hatched ants had gobbled up everything in sight they advanced on the city itself, in search of real meat! Heaven alone knows what the casualties are, but if the things get into the Tower, or undermine it and cause a collapse of the machinery, the death roll over the whole planet will be colossal once the

Gamma raiders get through. And you can be sure that that is just what they are waiting for—a break in the ray-barrier!"

As they drew near the besieged city, streaking through the skies, Thurston cut in the viziphone on the secret wavelength, calling the Ray-tower. There was no response. Again and again he gave the signal, but the screen remained blank.

On the screen was mirrored the sweating distorted face of the Ray-tower Chief. "They've reached the Tower," gasped the Chief. "They're all around us, burrowing. We're using atoflame guns through the windows, but we can't hold out much longer. They're running up the sides of the tower. One got in and young Clarton, the Junior Technician, is dead. Head almost severed by the beast's mandibles!"

The face disappeared, returned a few moments later. "The atocannon and rangefinders are now dead," announced the Chief. The man's head turned sharply, and Greg uttered a shout of warning through the viziphone as a huge black head appeared behind the Chief. An enormous clawing foreleg struck out at the man's face, and across the viziphone the two breathless watchers heard the furious clicking of the insectant's mandibles.

The beleaguered city was far below them now, and Thurston allowed the craft to circle lower and lower. Greg watched the city through the floorport. At first the frenzied movement in the wide streets and squares made no pattern, but presently the horrible details came into sharp relief. The huge ants were rushing with incredible speed in and out of buildings; an army of Security Troops, using atoflame guns

were pouring a white-hot fire into the creatures, but the Troops were hampered by running panic-stricken civilians. Greg saw a man fall, and his body was immediately clothed with the shiny black creatures, their bodies forming a solid heaving mass over the doomed victim, and within minutes the white bones became intermittently visible under the ravenous insectants, and then the creatures scurried away in search of fresh victims, leaving the clean-pick-bones glinting palely in the sunshine.

THE streets were in a state of incredible confusion, men and women, their clothes ripped and torn, mingled with the swiftly moving insectants in a crazy swaying throng. A building suddenly collapsed, burying beneath its ruins scores of the Troops and civilians, while the insectants scurried from its torn foundations.

"Poor devils!" muttered Thurston, eyeing the aimlessly-rushing men and women. "Blind as bats, most of them. Blinded with formic acid, and so maddened with pain and fear they're nothing but raving lunatics!"

Greg, remembering his own agony and temporary blindness, shuddered as he watched the shocking scene below from the circling aircar. "That inhuman monster, Decker, has something to answer for, if he's ever caught, Thurston."

"He will be, my lad," snapped the older man. "The whole undertaking is suicide for its perpetrators unless the Gamma raiders get through and take complete control." As though in answer to his prediction the screen in the craft emitted a signal. The call was from another Security Officer in an official aircar.

"Inspector Thurston," said the image of the officer. "The investigating craft have located a supersports craft on Cragrock Island, two hundred miles to sea. Officers landed in the cove and were immediately attacked by men with

atoflame guns. Two of the attackers are Gamma Centaurians. What are your instructions?"

"Withdraw the Officers and despatch an atomraider plane to blast Cragrock Island to dust!" snapped Thurston. He turned to Greg as he cut off the switch. "That's their nest, no doubt about it—with Gamma Centaurians among them. Decker probably used the supersports craft to drop the insectant bubbles. Well that's the end of their nest, and of Decker. And the Tower seems safe, so far. Apparently the Chief Technician was able to dispose of that insectant that got in. Anyway the windows are closed, and the Ray Staff have realised the futility of attempting to take shots at these monsters. Unless the brutes tear up the cables from the powerhouse the Ray will hold out for a long time yet. If only we could concentrate those ants somewhere and—Got it!" shouted Thurston suddenly. He switched on the viziscreen, but before his call was answered Greg, who had been closely watching the horrible scene below the circling aircar, gripped his arm.

"Look—that man, Thurston!" The young man pointed through the floorport at a man, his face goggled and masked, striding fearlessly through the scurrying insectants. He carried an atoflame gun in one hand, and in the other a compact gleaming cylinder which emitted a faint wispy jet. The ants, after waving their antennae, moved away from the man, and kept a respectable distance from him as he strode towards the tower.

"That—that's Decker!" exclaimed Greg. "It's his build. And he's got a control to protect himself. He must have prepared it with this in view. He's—yes!" Decker had reached the Tower, and already his atoflame gun was blasting at the door, sending little rivulets of molten metal trickling to the ground. "See!" cried Greg. "That was his idea from the start; to turn this

city into a shambles, and then walk in in the confusion and put the Ray Tower out of action. Either that or allow the great ants to pour in and gorge themselves on the men inside. Quick, Thurston! Drop down. We'll have to stop him!"

THURSTON, with a muttered exclamation brought the craft to ground level. Greg, taking up his atoflame gun slid open the window. The range was more than a hundred yards, and his shot lanced past the tall figure at the door. Decker's masked face turned sharply, and at the same instant the heavy door sagged inwards. Two of the insectants scurried across to the aircar, scenting meat for their whetted ravenous appetites, and Greg's next shot was directed at the foremost of these creatures. The thing leapt blindly at the aircar, and the second monster clambered over its body and thrust its great reeking head into the craft. Again Greg's atoflame gun sent its white-hot beam into the second insectant, and the creature, its great legs clawing the air, fell backwards, its head and front portion a vaporous mass.

Greg grabbed a pair of goggles from the locker on the dashboard and put them on. "Decker's in there, Thurston! I'm going after him!"

The other was talking rapidly and animatedly into the viziscreen. He paused at Greg's words. "Wait, I'll come with you." Greg shook his head. Professor Decker, armed with an atoflame pistol, as well as with his scientific knowledge, could put the Ray-barrier machinery out of use within minutes once he was in the ray-generating room. A delay of even a minute could have incalculably disastrous consequences. Greg leapt from the aircar, but he had scarcely covered ten yards of the distance to the Ray-tower when the dog-like ants closed in around him. Again and again he fired his atoflame gun at the creatures, but it

was like trying to stem a flood with a broom. The vile, biting smell was in his nostrils, nauseating him, but thanks to his goggles, not affecting his eyes. The creatures' powerful feet clawed at him; monstrous mandibles clicked and struck at his face. He literally burnt a path through the crowding brutes, and as quickly as he vaporized one insectant another took its place.

The last time he pressed the switch of the gun the weapon emitted a faint hiss, indicating that its magazine was empty.

"All right! Keep going!" Thurston, having completed his instructions over the viziphone, was beside him, goggled, and using his gun. Slowly the two men moved towards the open door, but already other great ants were entering the Ray-tower. As Greg reached the door an insectant came scuttling out, followed by another and yet another. One of the things crashed into Greg's legs, sending him sprawling. Thurston, afraid to use the gun on the monster that immediately pounced on Greg's chest, lifted his foot and kicked savagely at the creature's head, producing a queer metallic ringing sound and causing the thing to topple over on its long legs; and as Greg leapt to his feet Thurston despatched the great ant.

IT was Greg who first reached the ray-generating room. Thurston lingering long enough to pour flame into the slowly advancing insectants.

The young Inspector leapt, his hand clawing at the upraised arm. With a startled shout Decker spun half-round. Greg twisted the man's wrist and the gun dropped with a clatter to the floor; he brought up his left fist in a jolting short-arm blow; Decker's head jerked back, and the cylinder followed the gun to the floor, still emitting its pale vapour.

Decker sprawled, grasped one of the shining rails which guarded the mach-

inery, and as Greg rushed to close with him the other shot out his foot. It caught the Inspector full in the stomach. Pain shot through his body. He staggered back and Decker, a muffled maniacal laugh issuing through his helmet, pounced on the atoflame pistol. Greg, writhing on the floor, heard rushing footsteps as Thurston raced into the room. The Security man did not fire his own gun, obviously fearful that the bolt would vaporise the pulsating arc straight ahead; and once that arc died the detectors on the Gamma spaceships, no doubt hovering out in space patiently awaiting their opportunity, would pick up the cessation of the ray-pulses in the great defensive chain and flock to the broken link. Thurston, in desperation, hurled his own gun at the masked head.

There came a sharp crack! a muffled curse from Decker as he fell forward. Thurston leapt at the man, but Decker with amazing agility writhed and kicked like the maniac he was. He twisted from the Security man's grasp, shot around the mass of machinery and dashed to the other end of the room. Greg rose painfully to his feet. One of the dropped atoflame pistols lay at his feet. He grasped it and staggered in the wake of Thurston, who in turn was pursuing the crazed Decker.

Decker had reached the door. He blundered through, and a muffled scream reached Greg's ears. The Inspector ran towards the door, colliding heavily into Thurston, who had stopped abruptly, staring transfixed at the sight on the landing. Outside was a milling mass of insectants and in their midst, squirming and struggling futilely, his clothes already partly torn from his body, and blood pouring from the vicious wounds he had received from his own creations, was Professor

Decker—no longer carrying the control cylinder which had given him immunity from the giant ants.

Even as Greg raised the atoflame pistol to put an end to the ghastly struggle, white bones, streaked with red flesh showed briefly among the heaving bodies of the voracious ants. It was over, for Professor Decker. But the blast from the gun ended the gruesome feast of the insectants.

THE two men turned away from the smouldering twitching bodies. Greg returned and picked up the cylinder, then ran up the stairs to the top of the tower. The Chief Technician, his right shoulder bearing a gaping wound, lay on the floor, white of face, almost helplessly weak from loss of blood. The bodies of the two assistant technicians were beside him, the floor was stiel with the crushed remains of two insectants.

"Who is it?" The Chief raised streaming sightless eyes to the two men. Greg ran to the first-aid chest, and within a few minutes eased the agony of the man and partially restored his sight. "We did the best we could," gasped the Chief. "We opened the windows to shoot at them when they were attacking the crowd below, but we had to close up at the finish to save the Ray-barrier. If they had swarmed in they would have wrecked the plant." "They can't hold out much longer, Thurston! You sent for reinforcements, didn't you?"

"No!" Thurston shook his head. "I sent for raw meat from the Food Council. Craft will be over any time now to drop the meat in a mass outside the city. An atomraider plane will do the rest. When the monsters are massed around the meat, a safe distance from the city one bomb will finish them off."

THE END



PLANET of the LOST

Dayment went to face the unknown peril with a hunch, a sound machine and a pinch of salt—with which this yarn should also be taken.

PLANET of the Lost, they called it. I guess it was just one of the freaks of modern times. It wasn't even a planet really, just a planetoid gyrating round the outer orbit of Alpha Centauri. The whole point about it was that it was only two light-years outside the Rip from Uranus.

We've been using the Rips for the last couple of centuries, but even now you can't forecast where the exact point of departure will be. When the Rip ends and you're tossed back into normal space, is always a sticky period, and that's where the Planet of the Lost came into the picture.

Terra Central Control is still too wrapped up in the exploitation of the natural resources of Mars and Venus, so worry about the outer planets much.

My name's Dayment, by the way, Tim Dayment. My brother John and I were born on the Outer Station, so the

only things we know about Terra are what people tell us and what we see on the video-tape screens. We're part of the first generation to be born on one of the outer planets.

Outer Galactic Station No. 3 is situated on the cold side of Uranus. The establishment is housed in one huge, pressurised plasti-glass bubble and contains a research laboratory, offices and homes and a population of two hundred and fifty humans and four hundred automatic slaves. We have three space ships on the establishment and our main work is concerned with the mapping and exploration of Uranus and Alpha Centauri.

The Planet of the Lost has been known for the last sixty Terran years and it is believed that four space ships have piled up on it during that time.

It was getting towards the end of the eight-hour shift in the lab, and by that time I was more interested in the way that the plasti-tunic clung to Hilda's curves, than in the reaction of the Uranus plant life to certain chemical agents. Farrell, the controller, came in and asked me to come to his office. Regretfully I took my eyes off the curves and followed him out of the lab.

"Read that," he said, when we got into his office. He tossed over the message-form to me.

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ANNOUNCED INTENTION OF
COLONISING ALPHA CENTAURI
STOP INITIAL VOYAGE PLANNED
YEAR 32451 YOUR TIME
STOP IMPERATIVE YOU DES-
PATCH EXPEDITION IMMEDIATELY
WITH VIEW TO ESTABLISHING
PERMANENT STATION**

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ON ALPHA CENTAURI STOP GALACTIC CONVENTION DEMANDS PERMANENT STATION FOR THREE YEARS DURATION BEFORE ANY PLANETARY CLAIMS CAN BE ESTABLISHED STOP AM IMMEDIATELY DESPATCHING SPACE FLEET AND SUPPLIES ROUTED VIA VENUS STOP TIME DEMANDS YOU MUST DESPATCH SPACE FLEET IMMEDIATELY.

"What the hell do they think we've got up here?" Farrell asked bitterly. "Talking about despatching a space-ship fleet! Out of three ships, there's one on the other side of Uranus and one just started a six months' overhaul and completely out of action."

"That leaves us one ship."

"You're going to send that?" I asked him.

"Of course," he nodded, "I can't afford to ignore an instruction like that! I'll have to send John, he's the best pilot we've got. With supplies, there'll only be room for eight, I'll send four males and four females, and then, at least, they shouldn't get lonely!" he grinned all over his big face.

I WASN'T really happy about it, all the same. Unless things had altered a lot during the last five years, there was still the Rip and the Planet of the Lost to contend with. John was my brother, my only blood relation living, and I didn't like him going.

Ten days later they were ready. I'd worked like mad, with Hilda helping me in that time to fit isatophonic-beam equipment into the ship, so that they would be able to contact us. That at least would be some consolation. The whole population of Galactic Station No. 3 turned out to see him off.

They kept contact all the way until they reached the Rip. Then there was silence. That was to be expected anyway, a Rip is literally nothing and something, even as small as an isatophonic-beam, can't travel in nothing—if you

get what I mean. But the beam can travel round the outside of the Rip, and once they were clear of it, they should be able to make contact again.

The isatophon receiver unscrambled the beam and amplified it into voice reproduction. This made it a lot easier than some form of code. You just had to listen and hear the sender's voice, and speak into a sonicphone when you wished to transmit a message.

After seven hours' waiting, it came through.

"Tim!" the voice was hardly audible and I switched the monitors right over, but it didn't make the voice any louder. "Tim!" it was John's voice all right.

"What is your speed?" I asked him.

"Everything was all right until we came out of the Rip," he said, ignoring my question. "It must have a hell of a gravitational pull or something. There's just nothing I can do."

"Have you tried reversing the jets?" I yelled into the mouthpiece.

"Astro-compass, instruments — all shot to hell," he said. "No sensible readings. There's no chance for us, Tim. Don't let them send another ship! It's a death-trap!"

I couldn't understand why he wasn't answering my questions. After a lapse of about half an hour he came in again. "Getting pretty close now," he said. "Speed up to thirty thousand knots. The anti-gravs don't make any difference. I think there's something wrong with them!" His voice faded out and came in about twenty minutes later. "Nearly there now," his voice was matter-of-fact.

"Goodbye, Tim. Don't let them send another ship!"

THE whole transmission had been recorded on tape, so later on I only had to play it back for Farrell to know the whole story. He was white-faced by the time it was finished, and I hate to think how I looked. He beamed

a long message describing the tragedy, to Terra Central Council and as far as he was concerned, that was the end of the matter.

I talked about it in a vague sort of way to Hilda and we spent long days on working out the design. When we'd finished and got it onto paper, I took it along to Farrell.

"No, Tim," he shook his head decisively. "Under no circumstances am I going to risk another ship. You could be right and maybe this idea of yours could work, but I'm not sending any more humans to their death!"

That seemed to be the end of it.

"It's no good!" I told Hilda. "He won't hear of it!"

"Couldn't we take the ship?" she asked. "Two of us could run it and we could get away before anyone realised what we were doing!" "We could," I agreed wearily, "but we couldn't make the new machine and fit it, and without that the whole thing's useless!" "I suppose you're right!" she said passionately. "Damn Farrell! Once he's made up his mind, he never changes it!"

"Not always," said a dry voice behind us. "I sometimes have it changed for me!"

Farrell was standing behind us, a wry grin on his face. He handed me a message-form. I read it, feeling stupid at having been caught out like a small boy.

**REGRET LOSS OF SPACE SHIP
STOP PLUTONIAN FLEET
LEAVES NEXT MONTH YOUR
TIME STOP VITAL YOU MAKE
CONTACT ON ALPHA CEN-
TAURI STOP DESPATCH AN-
OTHER SHIP IMMEDIATELY.**

I handed the message to Hilda who read it eagerly.

WE worked like demons for the next week. By the end of it, the machinery was installed and everything ready. Farrell readily agreed that Hilda and I could pilot the ship. He didn't want to risk any more lives than was

necessary and I didn't blame him for that. We had one good rest before take-off.

The jets roared and thirty seconds later, Uranus was a rapidly receding orb beneath us. When we were clear of gravitational pull, I turned off the anti-gravs and adjusted the course towards the Rip.

We hit the Rip a week later and I cut the atomic motors and stopped worrying about our course. A Rip is a sort of vacuum in space and once you get into it, you're drawn along at a terrific speed until you reach its limits. There's nothing you can do about it once you're there. Instruments and power don't mean a thing once you're there but it has the great advantage of taking you where you're going at ten times the normal speed and with no fuel consumption.

Life was very sweet during the time we spent in the Rip. As it grew near to the time when we would leave it, I wondered if the machine would work. I'd built a super-jet into the nose of the ship and I was relying on that. Remembering John had told me that his speed violently increased as he neared the planetoid and the anti-gravs had no effect, I based my hope on this nose-jet.

We strapped ourselves into the two seats by the control-panel and waited tensely as the time approached to leave the Rip. Suddenly it happened—

"Look at the astro-compass!" Hilda breathed. I looked at it and saw the needle swinging crazily. The whole instrument-panel seemed to have gone haywire. The knot-ration was increasing at a fantastic pace. I watched the needle swinging round steadily until it hovered over the 20,000-knot mark and then climbed upward! Out of the plastifoma windscreen, I could see the dark ball of the planetoid getting larger rapidly. I cut in the anti-gravs and nothing happened. Hilda, as I had instructed her, was talking rapidly into

an isotophon, describing every detail to Farrell. But we weren't getting any reply from Uranus!

The knot-ratage needle hit the thirty thousand mark and then moved up to the limit and the instrument shattered under the pressure! Ahead of us the surface of the planetoid blotted out the whole view. I moved my hand over to the lever that controlled the nose-jet. Another ten seconds and my theory would work, or we would both be shattered in minute fragments!

"The transmitter is dead!" Hilda said coolly, nodding towards the instrument-panel.

With a horrible suddenness, the speed of the ship was cut right back. If we hadn't been strapped to our seats we would have plunged almost clean through the plasti-foam windscreen. One moment we were screaming towards almost certain destruction, and the next we were floating down towards the barren surface of the Planet of the Lost.

I TOOK my hand away from the lever and cut in the anti-gravs. A gentle whining noise became audible and the ship hovered peacefully about half a mile above the surface of the planetoid. We looked at each other for a long time without speaking.

Everything seemed very still after I had cut the motors. We could see, in the dim blue light, the bare, rough surface of the planet stretching away from beyond the windscreen. Hilda shivered: "It looks—evil!" she said.

"It certainly does!"

We both put on space-helmets and went out through the airlock. Hilda stood beside me, ready to act if anything went wrong, while I unscrewed the helmet. When I had taken it right off, I took a cautious sniff and breathed—air!

I motioned to Hilda to take off her helmet and had my first laugh in a long time when I saw the expression of amazement on her face. "That's something, anyway!" I said.

"What now?" Hilda asked with such feminine simplicity that I could have strangled her!

"I think I'll look around," I muttered inadequately. We moved back inside the ship and I got the equipment I thought necessary. It was bitterly cold on the planetoid so I wrapped a heavy coat round me and put on a pair of goggles and a soft helmet. I'd brought along a portable Heisener outfit—the other half of my hunch.

The goggles had haze-filter lenses and I could see much better in the murky blue that passed for daylight on the planetoid.

"You'd better guard the ship," I told Hilda. I took a couple of dextrahormones which have the advantage of not only being food but of keeping you awake for forty-eight hours.

Hilda watched me dress up and saw me take the Heisener outfit.

"How long will you be gone?" she asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Until I find something, I guess. Whatever you do, don't leave the ship. Close the airlock after I've gone and keep it closed. Try the isotophon again and see if you can contact Farrell and tell him what's happened."

AFTER I'd gone about a hundred yards I switched on the Heisener outfit and started swinging the vacuum-tube across the ground in front of me as I walked. I had a sneaking wish that I'd brought the ray-gun with me.

I'd got maybe two or more miles away from the ship when I saw through the goggles, something white-coloured on the ground. I quickened my pace and wished I hadn't when I got up to them. There was a pile of bones on the ground—human bones.

I heard a faint, skittering noise beside me, and turned round quickly, my heart pounding. Two figures stood there, looking at me, and they seemed almost as scared as I was. They had a head, a torso, arms and legs, but

after that there wasn't much similarity between them and human beings.

They seemed to get over their fright as I stood motionless, and they started coming towards me and I saw one of them had a club in his hand. Their intentions looked far from peaceful. Unconsciously I swung the vacuum tube round towards them and the outfit suddenly set up a vicious whine. They jumped back and looked terrified. I got the obvious idea. I walked towards them, swinging the tube and the whine grew steadily higher. A moment later they took to their heels and ran, flat-footed, away from the noise.

I'd had enough for the time being. I thought I could make an honorable retreat to the ship and tell Hilda what I had found. I hurried back as fast as I could, not consciously noticing that the whine of the Heisener outfit had stopped abruptly.

The first thing I noticed when I neared the ship was that the airlock was wide open. I didn't like the look of that. I plunged through the doorway into the interior of the ship and looked round. It was empty. Hilda had disappeared.

I stripped off the goggles and helmet and steadied my fingers down enough to light a cigarette. Then I noticed something else—the isotophon was working!

"Farrell calling Dayment. Farrell calling Dayment," the voice droned on in a monotone. "John has contacted us. He landed safely about five miles east of your position. Can see your ship from hill nearby. Cannot leave his crew as all are weak from lack of food. Urgent you contact them immediately with tablet supplies." There was a moment's pause. "Farrell calling Dayment, Farrell . . ." the voice started repeating the message.

I felt a surge of delirious joy! They were all still alive! Obviously Hilda had heard the message and started off immediately with the food

tablets. I pulled on the goggles again hastily and clamped the helmet over my head. And then I stopped.

I was a scientist. A man trained to disbelief. A man trained never to accept anything at its face value, but to question and probe until he was sure he had the truth. This could be a very neat trap! How did I know it was Farrell talking over the isotophon?

MAKING my way aft, I saw that the ray-gun was missing. Hilda had had enough sense to take that with her. I took one of the spare compasses and the Heisener outfit and started out again.

Half a mile due east from the ship, I found the body of one of the ape-men. The face was a blotch of burnt tissue where it had been seared by a ray-gun. No need to wonder what had happened to Hilda!

I made the hardest decision of my life. Every emotion I had was urging me to chase after the ape-men who had taken her away, but my brain, that little part of it that remained cold and kept an analytical approach, told me to go in the other direction. It remembered the Heisener picking up a beat near the bones.

It was an hour later when I reached them. I swung the vacuum tube round until I picked the high-pitched whine.

I found it about a quarter of a mile away. A hole, about three feet in diameter that disappeared straight into the ground.

It seemed an eternity before I came to the end of the tunnel. It swung round a sharp corner and suddenly opened out into a broad open space, with a high roof of rock about twenty feet above my head. A dozen or more ape-men saw me approach and came running towards me, swinging their clubs into the air. I switched on the Heisener and the noise was deafening. Walking towards them I swung the tube out in front of me and they fell back with shrill howls of terror.

A melodious flute-like sound came through the air and the ape-men suddenly prostrated themselves on the ground, grovelling in abject worship. Something came from behind the machinery, making its way towards me. I switched off the outfit, it obviously wasn't needed now.

It stood about four feet high and was bathed in a shimmering light that was generated from its body. Quivering tendrils served it for legs and arms. From this orifice, a silvery voice spoke in perfect English!

"Do not worry, Dayment," it said, "your friends are perfectly safe!"

"You are a Plutonian?" I asked it. The tendrils waved an assent. My hunch was right. I couldn't see how else the thing would have worked, unless it had been organised.

"You have more intelligence than the others," it said. "You guessed what was happening?"

"Where are the rest of the humans?" I asked him.

I FOLLOWED him across the floor of the cavern, past the machinery into another cave where a group of people were standing.

"Tim!" Hilda flung herself into my arms. I was surrounded by people eagerly greeting me and a moment later was shaking hands with my brother.

"I'm sorry about that fake message that was supposed to come from Farrell," he said. "But they threatened to turn Sofried over to the ape-men, if I didn't do it!"

"Don't worry about it," I told him. The Plutonian was joined by another of his kind. They stood together, their tendrils waving gently and the fixed lenses staring at us.

"Are there only the two of you?" I asked the first one.

"We are all that is needed," he said. "But remember if you try any violence, the ape-men will tear you apart!"

"What will you do with us?" I asked him.

"We do not destroy life unnecessarily," it said. "After Alpha Centauri has been inhabited by our species, you will be taken back to Pluto as exhibits of another planet's elementary form of life!"

I had no pity then. The prospect they held out for us was too horrible to contemplate. To be exhibited like the animals in the Dim Ages that were kept inside cages! I reached into my pocket casually and pulled out a cigarette and struck it between my lips. Then I felt for a match. They weren't looking at me, they were satisfied I was going to light the cigarette. I drove my hand deep in the pocket and grabbed a handful of grains. I took it out quickly and threw the grains into the faces of both of the Plutonians.

There was a horrible sizzling noise and one fearful, high-pitched moan, and then both of them were a vegetable mass on the floor of the cavern.

"AND the ape-men didn't bother you?" Farrell asked. "After they'd seen us destroy their gods, it made us a sort of super-god," I said. "They were only too glad to get out of our way!"

"I still don't understand what happened!" John said.

"How did you destroy them?" Sofried asked.

"I did a lot of research in the old video-tapes," I said. "Not much is known about Pluto, they don't encourage visitors from other planets. But there was a fantastic explorer in the 28th Century named Golphin who claimed he'd been to Pluto. No-one believed him. But he said a certain mineral that was common on Terra, was unknown on Pluto and had a violent reaction on the inhabitants. Rather like the effect on us if someone tipped a beaker of concentrated sulphuric acid on top of our heads."

"So you used that mineral?" Hilda asked. "But what was it?"

"Salt!" I said soberly.